

March 25, 2018 – Philippians 2:5-11 & Mark 11:1-11

What does it mean to be blessed? Christians tend to use that word a lot: “God has blessed me.” “Have a blessed day.” “Bless your heart.” We hear it in our music: “Lord, Dismiss Us With Your Blessing.” “O Blest the House, What Ere Befall.” “Blessed Be Your Name.” But what does all that actually mean?

Well, I think we all know that blessings are good things. The Bible itself lists many different great heroes of the past who were given blessings. Samson was blessed with great strength. Solomon was blessed with great wisdom. That sort of thing.

We also know that blessings are important. We were just talking in the preschool and kindergarten chapel services about Jacob and Esau. And about how Isaac wanted to give a blessing to Esau, but Jacob tricked him by disguising himself. And Esau was furious that Jacob had stolen Isaac's blessing away from him. So furious that Jacob had to run for his life. Blessings are serious business.

Today, in our Gospel reading and in our Introit and in our hymns and in the song the children just sang for us, we hear a line repeated over and over again. “*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*” In a way, it's the core message of Palm Sunday. But what does it even mean?

Well, that first word, hosanna, is one that we hear and use a lot, but it's actually a Hebrew word. It means “save us, Lord.” As you might imagine, it's a word common to Old Testament prayers. In fact, I was just teaching our Bible class about the Israelite Feast of Tabernacles that includes a prayer called “The Great Hosanna.” The great plea for God to save us.

And for those singing and waving palm branches on that first Palm Sunday, it was very likely a plea to save them from the Romans. “*Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!*” They cry out. “*Hosanna in the highest!*”

We're done living under the rule of the Romans. They tax us unjustly. They oppress us with tyrants like Pontius Pilate. They persecute us for our faith. Save us from them, Jesus. You can bring back the kingdom of our father David. You can make them go away. You can save us from all our pain and suffering.

It's a prayer that I think we can appreciate. We may not live under the Romans. In fact, we live in a country with far more religious liberty and far less religious oppression than ancient Rome. But we still have those moments in our lives when we say, “Hosanna. Save me. Make this problem go away. Make this pain go away. Hosanna in the highest.”

It's a very common, very honest prayer. And I don't fault the people of Jerusalem one bit for making it. Their focus may have been bit shortsighted. Their minds a bit small. Their understanding of who Jesus was a bit incomplete. But there's nothing wrong with asking God to save you from the bully who's treating you badly.

No, the part we need to focus on more is that first line: “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*” On the one hand, it's a very true statement. It actually comes from a psalm – Psalm 118 – that we read a verse from earlier.

It's part of what known as an entrance psalm. A psalm that the Israelites would sing as they entered into the Temple courts for worship and sacrifices. Or, later, as they entered a synagogue for the Sabbath teaching.

It was meant to express the joy they felt to be entering into God's house. That simply coming together to hear God's Word was a great blessing, all on its own. They didn't need the strength of Samson or the wisdom of Solomon to know that they were blessed. They were coming together in the name of the Lord. They were blessed people.

It's a wonderful thing to acknowledge. But that's not how the people of Jerusalem are using it. No, they're using it to describe Jesus. They are saying that he comes in the name of the Lord. And he is blessed because of that. And he can save them because he is blessed by God.

Like Samson saved the Israelites from the Philistines. Like Solomon gave the Israelites so many years of peace and prosperity. Jesus can save them because he is blessed.

Makes sense, really. If you saw Jesus doing the things he did, you'd probably draw the same conclusion. He could heal the sick. That's a blessing. He could drive out demons. That's a blessing. He could feed thousands and control the wind and waves and he could even raise the dead. In any other situation, you would say, "That's a man blessed by God. He has come in the name of the Lord to save us."

And yet, where did all those supposed blessings leave him? Dead on a cross. Which, I have no doubt, is what blew the minds of everyone in Jerusalem on Good Friday. He saved others, but he can't save himself. If you really are the Son of God, come down from there.

The mockery and insults that the people hurl at Jesus just five days later are an exact reversal of their words on Palm Sunday. "Save us" becomes "save yourself." "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" becomes "you don't come in the name of the Lord, because if you did, you'd come down from there."

Truth be told, Jesus wasn't blessed. Not in the way we think of the word. No, he was humbled. He was emptied. He was cursed.

Though he was in the blessed form of God, able to do everything that God can do, he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped. Though he was full of every power and blessing that God can bestow on a person, he emptied himself of everything. He made himself nothing. And took the very form of a servant.

They thought he was blessed by God, but he had already given up so much just to be born in human flesh and blood. He wasn't coming to establish a new kingdom of David. He already was king, of heaven and earth. And, instead, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.

They thought he was blessed by God, but he came to earth knowing he would die a cursed man's death. Cursed by being hung on a tree. Cursed by suffering for crimes he didn't commit. Cursed by taking our curse upon himself.

The people cried out, "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*" But Jesus wasn't blessed. No, we are. Blessed are we because he came in the name of the Lord.

The people cried out "hosanna" because they wanted salvation from the Romans. But he gives us something far better. He gives us salvation from our sins. He gives us salvation from guilt and shame. He gives us salvation from the curse of death. He gives us salvation from hell.

As Zechariah promises in our Old Testament lesson, he saves us from prison in the waterless pit, because of the blood of Jesus' covenant. A covenant that says there will be peace with God and hope for prisoners. A return to our stronghold and our kingdom.

Not the kingdom of our father David, like the people of Jerusalem thought. Not the kingdom of a little strip of land in Palestine. We are freed from sin's prison to return to the kingdom of God.

The waterless pit is no more, for we have passed through the water of baptism and have been made children of God. And we are given God's name. Because Jesus came in the name of the Lord and was cursed, you and I now come in the name of the Lord and are blessed.

What does it mean to be blessed? It means to receive a gift from God. Like those people on Palm Sunday morning, so many of us look at what we have – or don't have – and decide whether we are blessed based on the quantity of our possessions and the comforts of our life. We look for the strength of Samson or the wisdom of Solomon or the kingdom of our father David.

But what we learn on Good Friday is that we are already blessed. Blessed beyond all measure. We're blessed because even though we refuse to humble ourselves or serve our neighbor or obey God's Law in even the simplest ways, God looks to the humility and service and obedience of His Son and forgives us. We're blessed because even though we deserve that cross that Jesus hung on and that curse that Jesus received, God gives us what we don't deserve and makes us heirs of his kingdom.

We're blessed because we can cry out "hosanna," save us, and know that there is a God who hears and who answers. Who proclaims to you, "I forgive you." And proves it to you by sending the one who comes in the name of the Lord. The one whose name is above every name. Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.